

## Handling an employee who is blaming others

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I have an employee who is blaming others for things that go wrong. This is an otherwise productive individual who I would like to keep, but it's causing tension with co-workers. What do you recommend?

Laying blame, rather than correcting a situation, is unproductive. It does nothing to determine root causes, or identify ways to ensure the problem does not happen again. Allowing blaming to continue will only result in repeat errors, which cost the company time, money and effort. Your job as owner is to ensure the company operates at optimum - and blaming isn't part of optimum.

Blaming is all about avoidance. It's a form of self-protection. Employees who blame others are looking for a way out. It may come from internal pressures, or external ones. Start with understanding where it comes from.

### STEP-BY-STEP PLAN

Turning around the behavior of blaming will take persistence and patience. Wherever the behavior comes from, you as the owner have a decision to make. Will you focus time and effort on changing habits, or ask the employee to leave.

Let's assume that, as the reader above stated, this is an otherwise valuable employee, someone worth keeping. Lay out a plan of action to turn around the behavior. It is important to remember that in the plan of action, the employee will have to meet you half way for this to work.

**Step one:** Look at the environment. Blaming may result from internal pressures, or external ones. Ask yourself this: Is the employee in a situation where it is safe to make a mistake?

Some people have learned that things seem to go better if they can deflect the spotlight from what went wrong, and their possible involvement in the issue. The next time things go wrong, watch what happens next. Does the employee who makes the mistake get threatened? Or, is the employee encouraged to seek help, research the problem and identify corrective actions.

I've seen more than a few organizations get tied up in knots because errors are met with a "gotcha" mentality. A manager starts ranting when things go wrong, instead of accepting that there's a problem and working cooperatively to find a permanent fix. In this case, your work has to start up the food chain, with manager training.

**Step two:** Look at the individual. Let's say that you find that the manager's response to an error is to search for root causes. The manager works with the people involved to understand and correct the underlying issues. The individual who made the mistake is throwing blame around. Your work needs to focus on the individual.

**Step three:** Crack the shell. Individuals who find it acceptable to blame are looking to put up a shell of protection around themselves. The first thing you have to do is crack into the shell. Do that one-on-one, not in front of others. Go into an office, close the door, explain that you have something serious to discuss.

Describe the situation you observed, including the blaming behavior. Then describe a response that would be preferable. For example, you might try saying, "It would be better if, when there's a problem, you come forward and say so, then we can all help to figure out how to prevent the problem in the future."

Some people lay blame because they have a high need to be "right", and it's hard for them to admit when they're wrong. In this case, explain that it's OK to admit when you're wrong, it's more important for the organization to be "right" than the individual.

If the individual you're working with starts to make excuses or lay blame, put up your hand and say, sharply, "Stop!" Then explain that the only way the individual gets into trouble at this point is by continuing to make excuses or blame others. Ask the individual to review his or her role in the problem and then make two to three suggestions on what to do next time, to prevent the problem from happening in the first place.

**Step four:** Persistence. Keep in mind that since blaming is often a habit, it will take 21 successful repetitions to change the behavior. Until the individual involved has enough successful experiences learning a new behavior, coming forward without blame, you're going to have to correct each instance.

**Step five:** Make it clear to the individual that blaming is not an acceptable behavior. State that you're willing to work together to help the individual learn a new way of behaving. Be clear, however, that the individual must meet you more than half way.

Looking for a good book? Try *How To Manage Problem Employees: A Step-By-Step Guide for Turning Difficult Employees into High Performers*, by Glenn Shepard.

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